

VZCZCXRO6811
OO RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEH DU RUEHKUK RUEHMR RUEHPA RUEHRN RUEHROV RUEHTRO
DE RUEHKH #1633/01 3141412
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 091412Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2264
INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE
RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNFUR/DARFUR COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RHMFISS/CJTF HOA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KHARTOUM 001633

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR A/S FRAZER, S/E WILLIAMSON, AF/SPG, AF/C
NSC FOR PITTMAN AND HUDSON
ADDIS ABABA ALSO FOR USAU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/06/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [ASEC](#) [KPKO](#) [UN](#) [AU](#) [SU](#) [CD](#)

SUBJECT: CHADIAN REBELS: RFC'S ERDIMI SAYS IT IS HIS TURN
TO LEAD

REF: A. KHARTOUM 1616

[B](#). KHARTOUM 1593

[C](#). KHARTOUM 1574

[D](#). NDJAMENA 396

Classified By: CDA Alberto M. Fernandez, Reason: Section 1.4 (b) and (d)
)

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY: In two separate meetings on November 6 and 7, Timan Erdimi and his Secretary General of the Rally for the Forces of Change (RFC), Mahamat Hanno, both forcefully argued that Erdimi is the best leader for the Chadian rebels. Erdimi bashed rival UFDD leader Mahamat Nouri, and said that his own Zaghawa tribal identity could actually be an asset in a transitional Chadian government. Both RFC leaders claimed that they are not intimidated by the Government of Chad's new military assets, claiming that they will attack and hold large areas of eastern Chad. END SUMMARY.

BASHING NOURI

[2](#). (C) Erdimi reviewed rebel efforts to select a single leader of a unified movement (refs a-c), then quickly turned to criticize UFDD's Mahamat Nouri. Erdimi acknowledged that Nouri is the most senior leader, but cautioned that age should not be the sole criterion for selecting a leader, joking "if age is the most important thing, you would have ended up with McCain, not Obama." Hanno acknowledged that Erdimi and Nouri have the most experience, wisdom and knowledge among the movement leaders. However, he too accused Nouri of wanting to usurp a position that naturally should go to Erdimi, as the most experienced rebel leader. Hanno noted the problem of leadership would be resolved were Nouri and Erdimi to agree, as the other leaders would accept their decision. He said RFC was ready to make concessions and propose a third leader other than Nouri and Erdimi. (Note: Erdimi did not repeat this proposal in his separate meeting. End Note.)

[3](#). (C) According to Erdimi, the Government of Sudan previously pushed Mahamat Nouri's leadership because of his Gorane ethnicity. "The GoS did not want a new Chadian leader from tribes (like the Zaghawa and Arabs) that have a presence in both Chad and Sudan," said Erdimi. UFDD's Nouri twice failed to unite the Chadian rebels and topple Deby, and he should be replaced, Erdimi continued. According to Erdimi, there are very strong feelings among many different rebel leaders that Nouri is not an appropriate leader for this united rebel front.

ZAGHAWA IDENTITY AN ASSET, NOT A LIABILITY

14. (C) Asked whether a Chadian rebel leader from the Zaghawa tribe would be acceptable to the Government of Sudan, Erdimi responded, "in the short term the GoS does fear the Zaghawa, but they view Chad's and Darfur's Arabs as more of a long-term threat." According to Erdimi, during this latest search for a leader, the GoS has not proposed Nouri (or any other leader,) and will accept whomever the rebels choose. Although some rebel leaders fear replacing one Zaghawa for another (i.e. Deby for Erdimi,) Erdimi stated that he believes that this ethnic continuity could ease the transition period from one government to the next. According to Erdimi, the Zaghawa dominate the upper echelon of the GoC, and while many of them would reject a president of a different ethnicity, they would accept Deby's removal by another Zaghawa. "If the other rebels are telling you that we cannot have more Zaghawa leadership, they do not recognize the overall importance of this tribe and they will fail," claimed Erdimi.

15. (C) Hanno was more direct, accusing Nouri of fostering tribalism within the rebels, and saying that Nouri firmly believes that Chad should not be governed by another Zaghawa. Hanno added that the GoS recognizes that Chad will not be stable without a significant role for the Zaghawas. Although proudly asserting his Zaghawa identity, Erdimi claimed that RFC is an ethnically-diverse movement, and only 40 percent of its fighters are from the Zaghawa tribe.

PLAN TO TAKE THE EAST

16. (C) Although Hanno declined to comment on the schedule of the next offensive, he did assert that RFC has strongly

KHARTOUM 00001633 002 OF 002

considered the military plan of taking and holding Eastern Chad (as opposed to storming N'Djamena). Hanno asserted that this is only natural, as every Chadian president came to power by taking eastern Chad, and said that the most crucial area is around Abeche. While admitting that it is difficult to hold on to cities for an extended period of time, Hanno speculated that it would be possible to hold rural areas, attack cities to take GoC military equipment, and avoid international forces by steering clear of IDP and refugee camps. Separately, Erdimi agreed, saying that the GoS has not put any pressure on the rebels to halt their military activities, only encouraging them to select a single leader. Erdimi said that if there is no progress in negotiations (with Deby,) 2009 will be a very busy year for the rebels. Hanno was even more blunt, saying, "we are in Africa, and regime change is done by military force!"

NO FEAR FOR DEBY'S EQUIPMENT

17. (C) Military equipment alone has little value in Chad's rugged environment, and the RFC understands Deby's inherent weaknesses (especially as RFC is composed primarily of dissidents from Deby's army and guards,) Hanno said. For example, Hanno stated, Libya brought thousands of tanks and hundreds of helicopters to eastern Chad in the Chad-Libya war in the 1980's, but the more mobile and better motivated Chadian forces easily destroyed and captured all of these. Compared to this massive Libyan deployment, Deby's two or three planes and helicopters "are nothing," Hanno asserted. Separately Erdimi agreed, saying that equipment without the men is worthless. "Wars are fought by people, not equipment," summarized Hanno.

"MY MEN HAVE RETURNED"

18. (C) Erdimi said that over 80 percent of RFC's men who joined the government (in deals such as that brokered by GoC's Abderahman Moussa with former RFC commander Becher Issack Togoi in August 2008, ref d) have returned to the RFC's camps in Eastern Chad and Darfur. Erdimi said that the number of men who defected was greatly exaggerated by President Deby, and that only 135 documented RFC fighters

ever joined the government, the majority of whom now have returned. Hanno asserted the RFC is the real backbone of the rebellion, and that if the RFC pulled out, Deby would no longer be threatened and the rebellion would collapse. Hanno claimed that the RFC has approximately 2000 fighters. (Note: ICG's September 24 report on Chad cites a number of 3,000 for the RFC, while other Chadian rebels have estimated that the RFC has less than 1,000 troops, refs a-c.) Erdimi claimed that the RFC is committed to a united rebel front, and that it will not stage an attack alone, although it could succeed.

COMMENT:

- - - - -

19. (C) The meetings with Erdimi and Hanno proved that the Chadian rebels continue to struggle with competing ethnic identities, big egos, and an overall leadership struggle. Erdimi clearly sees himself as the most appropriate choice. He somewhat awkwardly and unconvincingly attempted to frame his ethnicity as acceptable to the rebels, the ruling elite in N'Djamena and to the GoS. Although all of the Chadian rebels with whom we have spoken agree that Deby must go and the international community must oversee negotiations, their similarities seem to stop at that. Certainly, the Khartoum clique has developed quite a allergy for the clannish and aggressive Zaghawa and fears that another Zaghawa ruling in Chad will repeat the pattern of Deby himself, who came to power in 1990 with the same Khartoum regime's help. Post will continue to follow Chadian rebel activities in Khartoum in the coming weeks, as contacts continue to predict that a single leader will be selected sometime in November.

FERNANDEZ